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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Shri Arif Mohomad Khan, M.P. initiated a discussion in Lok Sabha on atrocities against minorities.

Shri Lal Krishna Advani, Home Minister, gave his reply after discussions. He spoke on December 12, 1998.

This booklet is based on Home Minister's speech that date.

We are sure the members of BJP will greatly benefit by this effort of ours.

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Dr. Ram Kripal Sinha
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By L.K. Advani

I BECAME a member of Parliament in 1970 after being elected to the Rajya Sabha. Since then, barring the two years that followed my decision not to contest the general election of 1996, I have been a member of Parliament. In these 26 years, rare has been the year when Parliament did not debate issues linked to communal tension, communal violence and communal riots.

Often these debates would centre around the number of dead—how many were killed where, how many of them were Muslims and how many Hindus. For most of these last 28 years, the Congress was in power. The tone and tenor of the debate on communalism during the Congress years were similar to what we hear today. Then, too, we heard the charge that “minority communities are feeling insecure”.

In recent months we have heard the word “atrocities” mentioned quite a few times in the context of certain incidents. But the information received by our Government does not suggest that “atrocities” are being committed against any minority community. Such incidents can at best be described as excesses. They may even be described as injustice in some cases.

It is the Government's duty to take action if there are any excesses or if injustice has been done. If the Government does not take action against incidents of excesses or injustice, then a feeling of insecurity breeds among the people. And when this happens, statements suggesting that “minority communities are feeling insecure”, like those made by Shri G.M. Banatwala, gain legitimacy.

But if the Government takes action, as our Government has taken, then there should be no discussion on “minority communities feeling insecure or unprotected”. If India's minority communities develop an insecurity complex, then the nation's interest will be hurt. Our Government is determined to see



that this sense of insecurity, this insecurity complex, is dispelled. I believe that one of the key indicators of good governance, what we have described as the transformation of *swarajya* attained 50 years ago, into *surajya*, is *suraksha*, or security, for all citizens. If any citizen feels insecure, then it means there is something missing from governance. Our Government could have been criticised on this front if we had failed to take steps to ensure this sense of security for all.

These days there is a raging controversy over the film, *Fire*. I have not seen the film, but everytime I read about the film, I wonder why such films are made. Films on lesbianism may be fine for the USA or other Western countries. But do such films suit the Indian context? Yet, when I heard that some people had ransacked a theatre where the film was being screened, I told the police commissioner that this cannot be allowed: The protestors may belong to an ally of the BJP, but suitable action should be taken against them. When I heard that during a protest against *Fire* in Mumbai, some people belonging to a party took off their clothes, I said that any act of vandalism or indecency cannot be allowed in a democracy.

There is a place for decency and decorum in a democracy, not indecency or indecorum. I may agree with many of the things that those protesting against *Fire* are saying. If they had only been saying those things, I would not have contradicted them. But the moment they took the law into their hands and indulged in vandalism and indecency, I did my duty by deploring such action and asking the police to act against the protestors.

However, I do not wish to dwell on either *Fire* or the connected issues, as that would mean going off on a tangent. We are concerned, at the moment, that no citizen of this country—irrespective of whether he or she belongs to the majority community or to a minority community, this minority community or that minority community—should feel unsafe or insecure.

Let us recall history. What was the basis of Partition? It was the success of the Muslim League in creating an insecurity complex among the Muslim community by preaching that if India was not divided, that if India remained undivided as Congress wanted it, the Muslim minority would become underlings to the Hindu majority.

I will not go into the details of the attacks that were made on Gandhiji those days. After all, it was Gandhiji who talked of "*Ram Rajya*". Indeed, it was Gandhiji who first talked of "*Ram Rajya*" in the context of modern India. A young man once asked Gandhiji what was his concept of *swarajya*. Gandhiji replied that if he were to explain his concept of *swarajya* in one word, it would be "*Ram Rajya*." In India, the concept of "*Ram Rajya*" has always been that of an ideal kingdom. This is an ancient concept, and there is nothing new about it. When we refer to "*Ram Rajya*", we mean the concept which Gandhiji alluded to: that of an ideal dispensation.

Our critics, however, reduce it to the Ayodhya movement. They continue to refer to the events of December 6, 1992. This year, on December 6, some television journalists met me and sought my views on the events that occurred six years ago at Ayodhya. These past eight months I have avoided commenting on the issue. But since it was December 6, if I had told the journalists that I had nothing to say, perhaps it would have been misinterpreted. I told them that the events of December 6, 1992, were unfortunate and should not have occurred. Our party, our cause were affected by those events. I was personally affected by all that happened.

Subsequently, a Member of Parliament, reacting to my comments, said that if I had said the same thing soon after December 6, 1992, perhaps the events that followed would not have taken place. Another Member of Parliament, also reacting to my comments on December 6 this year, quipped, "Better late than never."

It is often said that the common people, the masses, have a short memory. But political leaders, among whom I would include Members of Parliament, each one of whom represents lakhs of people, are not ordinary people. They should not suffer from selective amnesia or the proverbial "short public memory".

I do not wish to repeat what those who saw me after the incident of December 6, 1992, had to say about my reaction. But I would like to point out that on December 27, 1992, *The Indian Express* published an article written by me on the front page. *The Telegraph* of Calcutta later published it as a full-page article. It would be in order to recall a paragraph

from that article for the benefit of those who are saying that I have described the event as "unfortunate" six years after it occurred:

"This year's Kar Seva day at Ayodhya on December 6th turned out to be one of the most depressing days in my life. Of course, many others there were ecstatic with joy, a mood I just could not share. I have seldom felt as dejected and downcast as I felt that day."

In that article, I had explained in detail why I felt dejected. My reaction to the event, which was contrary to what we had conceived of, today remains what it was when it had occurred.

Let me, however, add: I am proud about the Adyodhya movement. It was a powerful mass movement against the politics of vote-banks. I can further elaborate on this point, but there is no need for it in the present context.

Coming back to the Opposition's charge, that "numerous atrocities have been committed against minorities" and that "there is an upsurge in such incidents", a charge that I do not agree with at all, I would like to draw attention to the loss of human lives in communal violence in the last 10 years. After all, such incidents have been occurring every year. If we compare the loss of lives during each of these 10 years, from 1989 to 1998, it will be seen that the death toll is the lowest in 1998.

Yet, I recall that during the last general election campaign in January, certain Chief Ministers, whom I do not wish to name, had indulged in scare-mongering, telling the people that if a BJP-led Government came to power at the Centre, there would be riots across the country and rivers of blood would flow. Today, as 1998 draws to a close, everybody can see how wrong they were in their scary prognosis.

But I do not want to compare this year's death toll with that of last year's when the United Front was in power or with the death toll in earlier years when the Congress was in power. The issue, really, is not one of how many were killed, whether more were killed or fewer lost their lives. I am of the firm view that nobody should lose his or her life in communal violence. As far as I am concerned, every citizen should feel fully secure. And our Government is committed to fulfilling this responsibility.

Given the backdrop of the vicious campaign against us, that if we came to power at the Centre there would be riots and minorities would become insecure, I have been extra cautious in monitoring the situation. When I heard of certain incidents in Gujarat, I went out of my way to speak to the Gujarat Chief Minister, Shri Keshubhai Patel. When I heard of the incident at Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh (where four Christian nuns were raped) I was horrified and totally disgusted. It is unbelievable that anybody could rape nuns or sexually assault Jain sadhvis as the latter happened in a particular incident. Those who indulge in such despicable criminal activity are ogres and deserve no mercy.

The moment I heard of the Jhabua incident, I sought details from the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Later, somebody called me and said that the incident was acquiring a Hindu-Christian hue. I again contacted the Government of Madhya Pradesh and asked them to provide details about the religious identity of the accused, all of whom happened to be tribals. Some people suggested that I should seek the political identity of the accused, but I made it clear to the State Government that I was not interested in the political affiliation of those charged with committing the crime.

The Madhya Pradesh Government wrote to me, saying that 24 men figure in the list of accused and providing a list of their names. Of the 24 accused, 12 are Christians and rest Hindus. Subsequently, I referred to these details, not to underscore the fact that half the accused are Christians, but because I do not want such incidents to be given a communal tinge. A foreign diplomat called on me and raised the Jhabua issue. I gave him the details and he had nothing more to say. The facts of the case have knocked the bottom out of the campaign to give it a communal twist.

I do agree that the statement made by Shri B.L. Sharma, a VHP functionary, on the Jhabua incident was unfounded and uncalled for. I spoke to the senior-most VHP office-bearer and he issued a statement deploring the Jhabua incident. But, our critics keep on referring to Shri B.L. Sharma's statement, and not to the statements made by Acharya Giriraj Kishore or Shri Ashok Singhal who is certainly their tallest leader. There is selectivity even in the matter of quoting statements! Can such selectivity serve any useful purpose? Can it take us forward?

Recently, a Christian association issued a statement challenging the validity of what I had said—that half the accused in Jhabua are Christians. This association's objection was not based on facts. I immediately asked the Home Ministry to release to the Press all details, including the list of names of the accused and their religious identity, received from the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Even the date on which we received the information was made public. This put paid the campaign to twist the incident into a communal issue.

In November 1998, I had gone to attend an international Buddhist Conference at Sarnath. On that occasion, I had said: "Buddha did not announce any new religion. He was only restating with new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Hindu-Aryan civilisation. He cleansed the faith and the customs that were prevalent then of the dust that had accumulated, and focused on the essential ideals of *Dharma*. The relationship between India and Buddhism is unbreakable and this inseparableness must be understood by all. India is where Buddha was born and India is where Buddha's legacy lives...Buddha is an avatar for most Indians and is held in reverence by all sects and sub-sects of the Hindu society."

My comments were meant to underscore the universal appeal of Buddha; an appeal because of which Hindus consider Buddha to be among the *Dashavatar* of Hindu faith. Buddha is among the avatars that feature in any performance of Kathak or Bharat Natyam portraying the *Dashavatar*. True, Buddha was not a *believer* in the traditional sense of the term. He neither claimed to be god, nor did he claim to be a messenger of god. But it is *this* humility of Buddha that makes his appeal so universal. Little wonder, then, that Swami Vivekananda, a staunch *believer* in god, had this to say about Buddha:

"The life of Buddha shows that a man who does not believe in God, has no metaphysics, belongs to no sect and does not even go to any church or temple, even he can attain the highest. I wish I had even one infinitesimal part of Buddha's heart. Buddha may or may not have believed in god. That does not matter to me. He reached the same state of perfection to which others come by *bhakti* or love of god or *yoga* or *dhyana*. Perfection does not come from belief or faith. Talk

does not count for anything. Parrot can do that. Perfection comes through disinterested performance of action."

Our opponents often seize upon the core of our definition of cultural nationalism—that India is one nation, one people, one culture. The Congress does concede that India is one nation, but some others do not. For instance, that Left sees India as a multinational state—the Left said as much in its memorandum to the Sarkaria Commission. I could quote at length from that memorandum, but that would distract from the other point of dispute on which the Congress and the Left are together—that of India's "one culture". According to them, it is "pluralist culture". The culture of a large and ancient country like India is bound to be pluralist, it is bound to be composite, it is bound to have many diversities. You cannot have uniformity—that is inevitable. Nor do we talk of a uniform culture—we insist on the point that despite the pluralism and diversity, it is the common thread that runs through our culture that binds India as a nation.

In 1961, the AICC session was held at Madurai, the holy town of south India and famous for its Meenakshi temple. Addressing the AICC session, Jawaharlal Nehru made a point that touches the core of this issue: "India has, for ages past, been a country of pilgrimages. All over the country, you find these ancient places—from Badrinath, Kedarnath and Amarnath high up in the snowy Himalayas down to Kanyakumari in the south. What has drawn our people from the south to the north and from the north to the south in these great pilgrimages?" There is a question mark, and then he answers: "It is the feeling of one country and one culture and this feeling has bound us together."

This concept of Bharat as one great land, which the people consider *their* holy land, has come down the ages and has joined us together. Even though we have had different political kingdoms, and even though we may speak different languages, this silken bond still keeps us together in many ways. There is unity in diversity. But, it is this *silken* bond which brings about unity. Therefore, I respect Tamil as much as I respect Sindhi or Hindi or Marathi. I respect various religions of the country. Intolerance has no place in Hinduism.

I would go further and say, intolerance has no place in the culture of this country. It may have a place in the culture of another country. But that it has no place in this country

is not without significance. Majority and minority, irrespective of the difference in the religions they pursue, are bound by one culture. I once had a pleasant experience in Hyderabad. Archbishop Alappa came to see me and, at one point during our conversation, commented: "I totally endorse your concept of cultural nationalism. I would say personally, 'I am a Christian by religion but I am a Hindu by culture'." When he said this, he was not referring to any narrow concept of Hinduism.

As a nation, India has been secular down the ages, not despite but because of its Hindu majority. And that secular creed survived the communal trauma of 1947 when India witnessed unprecedented bloodshed and the tragic migration of lakhs of people. Pakistan went on to declare itself an Islamic state, providing preferential status to Muslims and virtually denying all rights to others. Even among Muslims, there are minority sects who are treated as second class citizens in Pakistan. On the other hand, if you go through the Constituent Assembly debates, you will not find a single voice pleading for the creation of a *Hindu Rajya*. India retained its secular creed. India has never witnessed and shall never witness religious discrimination. Indian secularism essentially guarantees equality and security to all citizens, irrespective of their religious identities. This guarantee is not a gift of the Constituent Assembly but that of India's ancient culture—you can call this culture *Bharatiya*, *Hindu* or *Indian*, it makes little difference.

Yet, the true meaning of secularism in the Indian context has been perverted into majority-baiting and denouncing all that is essentially rooted in India's cultural identity. I do not know when exactly was the inscription, "*Dharma Chakra Pravartanaye*" installed in the Lok Sabha. But if it were to be suggested today that such an inscription be installed, there would be as much opposition to it as we recently witnessed against Sanskrit and *Vande Mataram*. I do feel that the singing of *Vande Mataram* should not be made compulsory, but it is astounding that there should have been a call to Muslims to withdraw their children from schools just because *Vande Mataram* was being sung there!

Every session of Parliament begins with *Jana Gana Mana* and ends with *Vande Mataram*. Will members walk out of the

House in protest against *Vande Mataram*? I recall that this matter was discussed at considerable length in the Constituent Assembly. At that time, too, some people had voiced their opposition to *Vande Mataram*. After due deliberation, it was decided to make *Jana Gana Mana* the National Anthem. Let me quote what Dr Rajendra Prasad said on January 24, 1950:

"There is one matter which has been pending for discussion, namely, the question of the National Anthem. At one time, it was thought that the matter might be brought up before the House and a decision taken by the House by way of a Resolution. But it has been felt that instead of taking a formal decision by means of a Resolution which would mean division and vote, it is better if I make a statement with regard to the National Anthem reflecting the consensus of the House. The composition consisting of the words and music known as *Jana Gana Mana* is the National Anthem of India, subject to such alterations in the words as the Government may authorise as occasion arises, and the song *Vande Mataram* which has played a historic part in the struggle for Indian freedom shall be honoured equally with *Jana Gana Mana* and shall have equal status with it."

This was the decision announced by Dr Rajendra Prasad, as Chairman of the Constituent Assembly, on behalf of the whole House. And there was applause in the House.

Vande Mataram was never sung in Parliament. It was during Shri Shivraj Patil's tenure as Speaker that a unanimous decision was taken by the General Purposes Committee to introduce *Vande Mataram*. The decision was circulated among members. Some of them objected to it, but Shri Patil insisted on implementing the decision since it had been unanimously adopted by the committee. Thus, what should have been done immediately after Independence in 1947, was done 45 years later.

I remember that there was a time when the screening of films in theatres would end with *Jana Gana Mana*, but the practice was discontinued when it was noticed that some people, in utter disregard of the need to be respectful towards national symbols—in this case the National Anthem—would walk out of the theatres. In any other country, the Government would insist on stopping such display of disregard and

disrespect towards symbols of national honour. But India, being a soft state, opted for the line of least resistance and discontinued the practice.

I believe that disregard and disrespect towards symbols of national honour, and Government's inability to check them, during these past 50 years, have contributed to the weakening of India. I would urge everybody not to drag symbols of Indian nationhood into the domain of public debate. I could quote Gandhi extensively to show the exalted status of *Vande Mataram* in those days. Today, *fatwas* are issued against the singing of *Vande Mataram* and this sacrilege is hailed! You just cannot do that. If one were to accept the absurd pleading of those who object to *Vande Mataram* and assault symbols of Indian nationhood, then we should also remove from Parliament the plaque carrying the inscription "*Dharma Chakra Pravartanaye*".

Smt Indira Gandhi would begin her speeches at the UN either with a quotation from Rig Veda or a *shloka* from an Upanishad. Nobody would dare point out that as Prime Minister of a secular country, she should not quote the Vedas and Upanishads. But the pseudo-secularists have so poisoned the atmosphere today that if somebody talks of Sanskrit or *Saraswati Vandana*, he or she is pilloried. As if some great crime has been committed!

India is one nation—there may be several religions and various languages, but the essential culture of this nation, call it composite or varied, is unified by what Nehru so evocatively called the *silken bond*. Let us not break that bond but strengthen it.

(Based on the Home Minister's speech in the Lok Sabha on December 15, 1998)

